

Answering The Call:
The History Of The
Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

John Olszewski
Flower Hill Hose Company No. 1

conducted in association with the
Port Washington Public Library Local History Center

©2006



Text enclosed in a blue box is linked to graphics
pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: ... on January 6th at the Port Washington Public Library. So, John, how old were you when you joined the Department?

John Olszewski: I was about twenty-three, twenty-four.

Q: Why did you join?

JO: I had a lot of friends that were part of the Fire Department.

Q: Like who?

JO: Oh, Don Kurz, Tom Murray, Charlie Lang, my brother at the time was a member. His name's Ignas. Tom Mazur, Jay Caputo. There were so many. So many people that I knew from high school, and they just were being--living in Port Washington and they were all part of the Fire Department and, at the time, evidently having a wonderful time.

Q: And they were all members of Flower Hill.

JO: They were, yes. Yes, I was friendly with--friendlier with more people, I guess, that were members of Flower Hill. I know--by now, I know a lot of people with the other companies. But, yeah, most of my personal friends were members of Flower Hill.

Q: Do you remember your first fire?

JO: My very first fire? I remember my first--if you want to call it a major fire. It was on--I don't know if it was on South Road. It was in Harbor Acres. I think it was on South Road in Harbor Acres. And it was a fire that was started by a painter. They were doing some painting or paint removing, and they were using a little propane torch to do that. And they started the attic--the eaves started on fire, and that progressed into an attic fire. And it turned into a fairly major fire. That was the first real fire that I do remember. First time where I got in there and actually ate smoke (laughs). Chief Zwerlein was in charge. I remember that. And I remember him yelling at me a few times. Because when you're young and green and you have flame in front of you, you just got to sometimes take your head off and throw it aside. So ...

Q: Were you scared.

JO: ... you want to do everything. I was excited. I don't think I was scared. I probably got scared at one point. The first time you get into a situation where you have heat and so much smoke that you can't see your hand in front of your face, yeah, a little fear does take over. But, luckily, you know, you have people with you. You're very rarely, if ever, alone in a situation like that--hopefully never alone. So, you always have people pushing or pulling and directing, and they bring you back to your senses. So, I think it was more

excitement than fear.

Q: What about--do you have any childhood memories about the Fire Department?

JO: Not really. When I was younger I wasn't--I didn't really know people. My parents didn't know people in the firehouse per se. They had their own group of friends, but not Fire Department-related. No, it really started, I think, with me in high school. Some of the fellows that I knew that were older than me, as soon as they graduated, they joined. And, you know, you hang around with these people and you get involved, you get interested. And, before you know it, you want to ride the truck. You sign up and you join.

Q: Were you part of the Road Runners or the drill teams?

JO: I was not, no. By the time I joined the Fire Department, I was already married. I was already in business for myself. And the time constraints were such that I didn't do--I didn't participate, really, in a lot of extracurricular activities. My home life and my business kept me pretty busy, so I didn't get involved with the racing team. Although I support them wholeheartedly. I never got involved myself.

Q: What traditions does Flower Hill have that maybe the other departments don't have?

JO: What traditions? Hmm. I--you know, I'll have to refer back to maybe sixteen or eighteen

years ago. Some of the funny traditions we had when new members came in and how we initiated them. Some of them I can't repeat, but (laughs) some of the initiations, the rites of passage were always something you looked forward to when the annual meeting came about or when a new member got in. We always had fun with them. Obviously, never hurt anybody. But there were some ...

Q: Right. So, what'd you do? Like lock them in the fire truck or ...

JO: Yeah, just fun things. Something called the funnel trick, if--you know, everybody participated in that, including myself, when I got in.

Q: Now, what is that?

JO: They place a funnel in your belt and they put a quarter on your forehead, and they tell you that you have to keep tilting your head forward until the quarter lands in the funnel, which seems a very simple thing to do, except when you're young and naive and you don't know what they're going to do with that funnel, try as you may to get the quarter in there, by about the third or fourth try, generally you had about a pint of beer down the funnel (laughs).

Q: (Laughs).

JO: So that was a tradition that got broken, I guess, probably fifteen or sixteen years ago. But it was a lot of fun, and everybody got a laugh. But, no, I think the traditions are very similar throughout the companies, as far as enrollment and membership goes. It's a big, big organization, and everybody has the same mind, really. It's a lot of fun. It's like a big family.

Q: How is Flower Hill different from Protection and ...

JO: Atlantic's?

Q: Atlantic's?

JO: Well, we're the best company in town (laughs).

Q: (Laughs).

JO: What else can I say (laughs)?

Q: Well, of course. Of course. When you joined, who was the Captain of Flower Hill?

JO: Let me think. I can remember--Tommy Murray, I know was Flower Hill's Chief at the time.

Q: And who were the oldtimers you remember?

JO: At the time--oh, yeah, the oldtimers--you know, I was a little older than the average member when I joined, so I--not that I was an "oldtimer," not an old man at the time. But I was in my twenties, where most people that join are in their teens or early twenties. So, I kind of got a handle on the older fellows, right off the bat. Guys like Bob Fairley, George Kroll, Ed Gorman, Burt Monfort, Bill Mullen. I mean, these are all fellows that had, at the time, thirty or thirty-five years in, and some of them, unfortunately, are not with us today, and some of them--George Van Skirt, he's another one. He's a sixty-some-odd year member of the company. These are guys that had--had stories to tell that you can't make up. I mean, they had memories of the fire service--God! I gotta believe that they had horses and buggies when these guys got in, because some of the stories were just phenomenal. And you can hear the same story over and over and never get tired. You know, sometimes a different slant to the same story, and they always came out the heros. But you love to hear stuff like that. And, you know, these guys were just giving of themselves. They just devoted--some of these guys really did--they devoted their lives to the fire service. And just, for me, it was just--it was a great experience talking to these older guys. And still today, you know, when you get a fifty year member or sixty year member, you love to sit down and just shoot the breeze with them, because they tell you stories that you just--you know, you weren't there. You just can't really picture vividly. But when you hear the story over and over, you almost feel as though

you were there. It's a terrific thing.

Q: What about the big fires?

JO: Big fires in ...

Q: What's memorable fires that you've remember?

JO: One of the--well, again, when I first got in, there was a fire on Morgan Place, which is vivid in my mind, even today. It was a very small--probably a two-bedroom house on Morgan Place. Unfortunately, there was a death involved. One of the occupants--two of the occupants, I'm sorry, perished in the fire. And as I said, it was when I first got in the fire service, and I was very young, and that just left an impression. Very scary impression of what fire can do--the ravages of fire. You know, and again, there's no classroom, there's no preparation for walking into, after the blaze is doused and the fire is out, to walk in and to find a victim. Nothing prepares you for that, and that really sticks in my mind forever. That was really the first, and obviously the fire ...

Q: That's the first fatality.

JO: That's the first fatality.

Q: Right.

JO: And one of the biggest fires, also, in my early stages of fire service. When I was an Engineer--an Assistant Engineer--they had a fire on Main Street where Bobby Dayton perished. And that--I think that changed a lot of people's views of the fire service and ...

Q: In what way?

JO: I think a lot of people, including myself, felt that we're not invincible. And I think a lot of us think we are. We have good gear. We have good equipment. Even now talking about it ...

Q: That's all right.

JO: ... sorry, I've got to stop.

Q: So, how did you feel when you first got in? You were excited?

JO: Oh, absolutely. It was exhilarating.

Q: What kind of training did you have?

JO: Training is terrific. I mean, we have fire school every summer. We have Department Operations. The fire training that the Nassau County Academy for fires is second to none. The Academy's a great place, and they have great equipment. Very knowledgeable Chiefs teaching the courses. Terrific. And I would say that over the years we've probably doubled, maybe tripled the amount of training available to the average member. The equipment's gotten better; the training is superior--second to none. You know, people keep saying volunteer versus paid fire department; who's better? Who's this, who's that? I'm going to tell you, the volunteer service never stops training. You know, there's all--any week during the year, there's something going on. If it's not County sponsored, it's the local companies, each sharing information and showing the equipment--the individual equipment that the companies have. Training really never stops, and I think the training is terrific. And I think that's part of the reason why the Fire Department--my company as well as the others--they're just, I think they're second to none. They're terrific.

Q: What was your first job in the Department?

JO: First job everybody has is you're a rookie. You do what you're told (laughs).

Q: (Laughs).

JO: I became a driver very early. Probably within my first year in the company, I became a

driver of the equipment. Because my business is right up the road from our firehouse. So I was, if not always, almost always the first guy at the scene. And daytime fires historically have limited manpower. Those people that are out of town obviously don't make it. So I was always there. Especially being new, young, ambitious, I was always there. So, it didn't take much--much prodding to get me qualified on the rigs, and before you knew it, I was a driver. And that was just beginning. From there, I--very shortly thereafter. I think it was within about three years, I became an Assistant Engineer and moved up the ladder.

Q: Quickly?

JO: Yeah, fairly rapidly. I was a--I was an Engineer under Bobby Dayton. When he passed away, as a matter of fact, I moved up--I believe at that point I skipped the actual Engineer's position and became First Lieutenant--or Second Lieutenant, I'm sorry--right after Bobby died. So, that pushed everybody up a little bit. And, you know, I don't believe in young guys moving up the ladder too quickly, because I really think, the way it's designed, they want you--you have to stay in a position for a couple of years to really learn that job, to learn the respect for the position. And, unfortunately, when you have an unfortunate incident, as with Bobby, everybody moves up sometimes too fast.

Q: What about when you became Captain? What were those responsibilities?

JO: Responsibilities are pretty great. I mean, you have, obviously, a group of whatever the membership happens to be. I believe when I was Captain, we had in the vicinity of seventy-five or seventy-eight members. I was lucky enough to have about twelve--twelve or thirteen rookies or probies at the time, which makes your life very easy, because then you have built-in work power. You know, if you need something done, you have a group of young, ambitious, eager-to-do-anything guys at your disposal. And, as I said, the membership being up in the seventies at the time, it made my life easy in that respect, because we were able to get a lot of things done. Unfortunately, like with any elected position, you know, you gain the respect of some and you lose that of others, because as soon as you start making decisions (laughs), not everybody agrees with them. So, half the people that you know, all of a sudden are looking at you cross-eyed, and the other half are happy to help you. But, it was a terrific position. It ...

Q: And you liked it.

JO: ... it's something I really enjoyed. I did enjoy. Like with any elected position, I think you really have to invest as much time as you possibly can, and the only thing I can say in retrospect is that I wish I would have had more time to devote to it, because it's--it really is a full-time job. Even though it's a volunteer fire service, there's so many things going on--there's so much stuff going on, and decisions to be made, and equipment to be bought and repaired, and so on and so forth. It really takes--it's an everyday job; it's not a once-a-week type of job. You really have to invest a lot of time to get a lot out of it. And I

think I did. I learned a lot. I made a lot of friends. I learned--at that point, you really begin to realize how the Department works as a whole, how the companies meld and get the job done, because you're in a position now where you're making decisions with the Chief's office, and so on. And it really was very interesting.

Q: What about--who was like the most memorable character you ever met in the Fire Department?

JO: The most memorable?

Q: Yeah.

JO: Hmm. Well, there's so many. Quite honestly, there are so many. You know, I'll go back to one of the oldtimers--Ed Gorman, who I didn't know for a lot of years. But he was the type of person that when you meet him, you never forget him.

Q: Right. Why?

JO: He's a massive human being, number one. Just his size was enough. He had a hand the size of a baseball glove, and he had nothing but good things to say. And, I think it's people like that that really leave a lasting impression of what the fire service really is all about. I mean, here's a man who worked hard all his life. He was a member of the fire

service. Would do anything that was ever asked of him. And, to this day, I--anybody who met him, I think, if you mentioned his name, you'll never hear a bad thing about him. He's just that type of a person. When you meet him, you just remember him. He always had stories to tell. You'd sit down and talk across the bar and have a couple of cocktails, and his famous line was that he had "feet of clay." Which means he had a little bit too much to drink and it was time to head for home. And luckily for Brother Ed, he lived only a couple of short blocks from the firehouse, so he did spend a lot of time there, and he was a regular--somebody who you regularly saw there. Almost every time you'd walk in, you'd see Brother Ed. He was just a hell of a nice guy.

Q: Is he still alive?

JO: No, he passed on, unfortunately. But his memory will last forever. He really is one of those kind of guys.

JO: Now, what about the block parties?

JO: Block parties were terrific. I always had a lot of fun. As I said, by the time I got in, I think we really only had two block parties per se ...

Q: On Channel Drive?

JO: On Channel Drive in my career with the fire service. Prior to that, I mean, I always--I was there, you know, as a kid. I think we were all there, and we always had a good time. When I was first in the fire service, though, there were--I think the last two of the block parties is where I really caught--but I was a rookie really at the time, so I was doing a lot of running around.

Q: Were they still making the clam chowder then?

JO: They were making clam chowder. Matter of fact, you mention clam chowder. I remember Frank Lubin, who's still a member of Flower Hill now, was always famous for his clam chowder, and he would always do it. I remember his clam chowder from Flower Hill's picnics that we used to have every summer. Whether it be at Lions Field or Manorhaven Park. And Frank always had a giant cauldron of clam chowder. And he always made enough, knowing that more was going to go home with people than what would be eaten at the picnic. But, again, you know ...

Q: What did he make it in? Like a fifty-five gallon drum?

JO: No. He had--I don't know if we still have it at Flower Hill. I'll bet it's still hanging around somewhere in one of the storage sheds. But it was a cast iron cauldron. I can't call it anything but. It looked like it was custom-made for Frank for his clam chowder. But it had to be--it had to hold thirty-five or forty gallons. It was heavy. It took two

people just to move it. He would set it up early in the morning whatever day our picnic was, and he would be down there shucking clams and cutting up vegetables from probably six o'clock in the morning. And everybody just waited--mouth watering, waiting for that clam--for Frank to say, "Okay, chowder's on." And ...

Q: Did he make it like a real--a fire underneath, like a open fire underneath the cauldron?

JO: Oh, yeah. Yeah, Yeah. Yeah, well, he had, it was like a gas burner actually and probably, I'm sure years ago, they probably did stoke it with wood. But I remember they had, you know, special type of gas grills, gas burners set up under it. And, yeah, that we'll remember forever.

Q: Why did they stop that?

JO: I think, as you see, over time, the membership has dwindled to some degree. Not only here in Port Washington, but across--across the Island for sure and, I'm sure, across the nation. It's just become a different society. I hate to say that volunteerism is dying, but I think what's happening is there are more demands being put on everybody. It's very expensive to live. Especially in the Northeast here, it's very expensive to live. You'll find people have two jobs now, where they used to have one. They don't have the free time. The younger folks can't afford to live here. When they do get out of college, a lot of them move out of town. All three of my kids, as an example, moved out of Port

Washington. It's not because they don't like Port Washington; it's because it's just so darn expensive to live here. And that, obviously, takes a big portion of the membership that we could have, and they're moving. They're moving into, you know, areas where they can actually afford an apartment or afford to buy a house. My son desperately wanted to buy a house, and he moved out--way out into Suffolk County, because he could afford it there; he couldn't afford it here. So, and it's a shame to see, but you see that across the board. And when you have a limited membership, trying to put together something like a block party or a picnic takes a lot of work. I mean, if you have a hundred members, it takes ninety-five of those members to help you set up a picnic where a hundred members can enjoy themselves and appreciate it. And I really have to believe that because of the dwindling manpower, you know, the dwindling membership, it's just very tough to do.

Q: What did your family think about you joining the Fire Department? Were they involved at all?

JO: Not my parents so much, but my wife thought I was out of my mind (laughs). Only because, as I said, being in business for yourself takes a lot of hours, and she knew that then. I was probably working fifteen to sixteen hours a day at the time. And her famous line is, "How are you going to make time for us?" Well, I survived. For twenty-four years, I managed to make time. I raised a family. Hopefully, my wife still loves me (laughs).

Q: What are the biggest changes that you see in the Department?

JO: The biggest changes are the--I think the equipment and the training. The equipment has really gotten to a point where it's--I mean, it's all state-of-the-art. And I don't mean just the trucks. But, I mean, communication has improved. The trucks certainly have improved. They've gotten tremendous--they've gotten big. They've gotten very powerful. They carry a lot of water. They have a lot of capacity. The tower ladders are getting longer, and the towers are getting higher. And the biggest change is that, I think, the cost of running a major business like a fire service is really skyrocketing. But I think what a lot of people tend to forget is that it is still volunteer and that none of the money that we're spending is for salaries; it's all just for equipment and I won't even say training. But at some point, it's possibly some courses here or there.

Q: Are there any women in Flower Hill?

JO: No. We have had. Over the years, we have had at least three that come to mind.

Q: Who were they?

JO: Rene Beraldi (Balderi) was a rookie when I was a Captain. That's why her name comes right to mind. Well, you know what? The names escape me, because it's been years now. I can picture them. Suzanne, but I can't remember Suzanne's last name, who ended

up dating another firefighter who's not a member anymore either. Then, the third girl, you know what? She was actually my son's age, and I can picture her, but I can't remember her name unfortunately. But all three female members, and we never had any problem. They -- I think they stopped--two of them moved out of town, and one of them ended up marrying another firefighter. She still lives in town, but she's now raising a family, so she's not a firefighter herself.

Q: Has the ethnicity changed in the Fire Department?

JO: Yes. Yes. I know when I first got in the fire company, Fire Department, there were no Black members. There were no Spanish members. Standard joke was, you know, we had--and don't take this the wrong way--but Atlantic's was always called the "Guinea Garage," you know ...

Q: That's right. That's right.

JO: ... and only Italians went up there. And Flower Hill, I think, had a kind of a melting pot. And really Atlantic's was noted for being mostly Italian.

Q: Right.

JO: To this day, I don't know, they're--a lot of the older members are still there, so we--I still

think of it as that in a very polite way, obviously. But, no, it has changed. I mean, we have Black members. We have Spanish members. We all get along. They're all great people, and I don't know why ...

Q: Do you have to recruit them?

JO: ... twenty-five years ago, it wasn't that, you know. I never really did ...

Q: Do you actively recruit them?

JO: We try to recruit anywhere and any--oh, yeah, absolutely. We would not--we turn nobody away. I mean, we're looking for help, and we want people who want to participate.

Q: Do they have to pass a physical?

JO: Yes, an annual physical is required.

Q: And then, they have to pass the training?

JO: Well, the physical is for their own good, and to protect us so that we know that they're able to participate in any kind of strenuous activity. The physicals actually came into

play, I'll say, about fifteen years ago. I'll refer again back to the fire where Bobby Dayton died. The Department changed dramatically after that occurred, with safety in mind. Not that we were cowboys before that. But I think, again, because of that situation, I think a lot of people--the Chiefs included--realized that we're not invincible. That all this great gear and equipment we have is not going to save you if you put yourself in a position ...

Q: Of danger.

JO: ... of danger. So training is the utmost. The equipment has, you know, any time there's new and better equipment available, the Department participates in it. They'll actively go after anything they can, including communications. Because any kind of a communications gap at a fire incident could be life threatening, obviously. So, communication is very important. And your physical ability to carry on in those kind of conditions is critical.

Q: How have liability issues changed the Department? I mean, it's changed every business.

JO: It has. Liability is something that's always been there. And, again, going back twelve, fifteen, eighteen years, people really didn't concern themselves too much. I think if you go back in history, the Fire Department--Fire Department members have always taken chances and probably loved the ability and the chance to take a crazy chance. And I think guys--you know, the macho thing, guys thrive on that. Liability probably became

an issue fifteen, eighteen, twenty years ago with insurance claims and with law suits and so on and so forth. And with that in mind, it goes again back to the best equipment we can get, the best training. The training of the utmost. You know, now there are more stringent training requirements than there were when I first became a member. That's for sure.

Q: Has anyone ever sued ...

JO: And they don't relax it.

Q: ... the Department after like you fought a fire at the house and ...

JO: I can't remember of a case where--no, I can't remember of a case where we may have been negligent. Is that what you mean?

Q: No, not that you were, but that they said you were.

JO: Yeah, I can't remember of any case. If there was, I wasn't privy to it.

Q: Are people always thankful?

JO: For the most part. I can think of one, in particular, who--well, we won't mention any

names, but it was a business that--considerable fire damage, and not thankful at all after we were said and done. There were some remarks made--disparaging comments. And that kind of leaves a lousy feeling, because I don't think anybody under any circumstances would do anything less than the best they possibly can, given the circumstances. And each fire and each situation is different, you know. Sometimes we're, I'll say, very lucky. I mean, I think we're always skilled and we always try to do the right thing. Sometimes you're luckier than others. There's always, you know, the human element involved, although sometimes you can call a wrong--make a wrong call. That can happen. If all you lose is property, that's okay. I mean, you always think about life and then property, in my feeling, and so forth. No matter what the situation is, sometimes the fire is just so far out of control, you can't save a room or a building because you want to protect the people that are there fighting the fire. And I think in situations like that, the homeowner or the business owner, they tend to overlook that. They're focusing on their property, and they know nobody's going to get hurt, but we know that we can. You know, when you're fighting a fire, obviously there are always dangers involved, even if there's no search and rescue involved. Just fighting the fire, there's always a possibility of collapse or explosion, especially in a commercial establishment. You never know what's inside the building. So that's always a big concern.

Q: What was like your best day as a firefighter? Your proudest day?

JO: My proudest day. Yeah, my proudest day goes along with my--with my saddest day. A bunch of our firefighters were given awards after the Bobby Dayton fire. And when they presented us with the medals and the certificates, I was very proud to be a part of the fire service. I was proud because my kids were there. But, at the same time, very sad, you know, given the circumstances. But I was proud of the camaraderie of during that fire, after that fire, and, honestly, since that fire, I think the camaraderie in the fire service really has gotten much tighter, much closer, I think.

Q: Because of the intensity ...

JO: I really think, yeah. Really, it brings you together as a family. It brings you together like nothing else can, when something like that occurs.

Q: Do people still call the Fire Department if they have a cat in a tree?

JO: (Laughs).

Q: I mean those weird calls.

JO: We get some screwy calls. Like I hear more ambulance--crazy ambulance calls than I do fire calls. I mean, fire calls, honestly, we don't have too many weird ones, no. I mean, we've had a few like that with a cat in the tree, or ...

Q: And did you get the cat out?

JO: ... a kid's stuck in a bathroom. I mean, who do you call? Well, you can call the police or let's call the Fire Department, because they can break into the room. So, I've been on several calls where, you know, a child--toddler--not an infant, but a toddler or something went to the bathroom and locked the door for whatever reason, and they don't know how to unlock it. And you have to laugh when you get there. As long as you get the kid out, and he's crying usually, and the parent is all upset. But sometimes common sense goes out the window. So, calls like that you get. But the ambulance calls that you hear come over are very strange. I mean, I would not call an ambulance for a nosebleed, as an example. But, you don't know the situation or exactly what's involved on the other end. But, when you hear certain calls like that, or, you know, a stomach ache. I mean, some of the calls--the description of the calls--sound a little strange. No doubt about it.

Q: Did you ever have a narrow escape, yourself?

JO: No. No, I consider myself very lucky. I've always had good people surrounding me. I remember, again, a fire early in my career, where I was on a line. I had a water line. I was inside a very confined area. I was having trouble moving this line. And I remember turning around and yelling to push the line forward so we could move, and when I did that, I turned around and there was nobody there. So, that kind of gave me a strange

feeling. Because somebody'd bailed out on me, and then you get a little worried. You know, you wonder why. And so we had words after the fact. And I don't know whether I accepted his explanation or not, but luckily nothing happened because of it. I was still able--big situation ...

Q: Where was he?

JO: I'm sorry?

Q: Where was he?

JO: He just decided he'd had enough, and his Scott Pack wasn't working properly, but instead of letting me know, "Hey, I've got to back out," he just began to back out. So, he left me kind of standing there with the hose line. And that's something you never do. You never leave somebody on the line by themselves. You never leave anybody in a tight situation by themselves. You always make sure. You tap somebody on the shoulder. You work as a team. You have to be a team. People have to know what you're doing.

Q: What do you do--or how do you deal with the traumas, or, you know, the post--do people get post-traumatic, you know, kind of stress things from fires? Firefighters?

JO: I would say. I mean, you know ...

Q: What do you do?

JO: What do you do? I guess the best thing is to talk to people really. Seek professional help if you can. It's available if there is ever a situation like that. But I think talking to people--I find myself to be kind of a private person. And, even at home, my wife has to drag information out of me. So, I kind of hold things in and hold things in until I can't anymore. But, I think that's the bad part of it. I really think it's important to get out and get your feelings out and ...

Q: Is there a mechanism in place in the Fire Department for guys, if ...

JO: If there's ever a situation that warrants it, there's always help available. All you have to do, you know, any company officer, any Department officer, you just have to just let them know, and then help will be found. We've had situations over the year. I know when I was Captain, we had situations where people did need specific help. And if we couldn't provide it--whether it's financially or other ways--I mean, we have people from all the walks of life that are members of the Department, and they know how to get help to people. Our chaplain, Tom Tobin who's been chaplain forever and ever, he's a blessing. He's a godsend to the Department. Like him or not--you'll hear controversy (laughs) about that--but he's been a wonderful human being, and he--I've used--you know, I bounced things off him even when I was Captain, and he was a tremendous help

for some of my members for some of the help they needed. Just in directing us and seeking the type of help that they need. It's always available, and nobody will ever shun you if you need help. The biggest problem is for a lot of people to come out and ask for that help. But there is definitely trauma involved. No doubt about it.

Q: Do you carry any kind of good luck charm?

JO: No (laughs). I'm not usually superstitious.

Q: Now, does your son, or your daughters--were they ever interested in joining the Department?

JO: Well, back to the same thing that I mentioned about the younger people. Once they went on to--my son--my daughter was actually, yes, she came back from college, and she was toying with the idea of joining the Fire Medics. She had taken her EMT class in college, and she was--her major was in a science field, so she was interested in that. But when she did get out of college, jobs came up and interviews, and, you know, she got very busy with that. And then a boyfriend came up, and before you know it, she started talking to me like, "Dad, I don't really think I have the time to devote." And it does take time. The training takes time. And just the participation. You're going on calls--ambulance calls, in particular. And it's not a ten, fifteen minute call. If you go on an ambulance call, you could spend an hour, hour and a half, two hours there. So, unfortunately, she says, you

know, "I'm starting the new job. I'm going to be working in the City fourteen hour days, and then," she says, "I just don't think I can do it." So, unfortunately, no. And my son, once he got out of college and got the job, he shortly thereafter bought a house, and he's out of town.

Q: Do you like the social aspects of the Fire Department?

JO: I think that's a big part of belonging to any organization. The firehouse in particular, because it's such a diverse group. It really is. Similar and dissimilar interests. And when you get together with a group of twenty or thirty or fifty people and their wives, the conversations that come up and the things that you can learn is just--yeah, it's very inspiring to see. I love any kind of a Department function where we get as many people together as we can. I just think that's the greatest thing in the world. And I really believe that it was more of a social hub probably twenty-five years ago, than it is today, I guess, because society is changing and kids have different ideas and they don't hang around with us oldtimers like we did with the oldtimers when we got in, it seems. But the social aspect, I think, is very important, and I love it.

Q: What makes a good firefighter?

JO: Determination. Willingness to help. Honesty. I think those are the three best virtues.

Q: And what about--how did your Department handle 9/11?

JO: The Department as a whole did send people into Manhattan. Talking with--speaking personally to some of the fellows my own age, they really--if called on, they would have went in and done whatever they had to, but there were many people that really were taken aback by it. Everybody was taken aback by it. But a lot of members didn't really want to go unless they really needed them. I think in any organization, you have glory seekers and you have those that'll do anything when asked, and then you have those that know when to stay away. And that was very traumatic, as you know, for everybody. I think maybe more so for some members than others. But the members that did go in got a great feeling of satisfaction of helping. The Department as a whole, I know we collected food and clothing for not only the firefighters, but anybody who was affected by it and needed help. You know, I think we offered any help we could get--any help we could give, rather. I know, since then, a couple of things were put into place where our equipment is available, God forbid there's another disaster like that. I know the tally of the whole--the City Fire Department and Long Island battalions have made different arrangements to have equipment moved in to strategic locations, and so on and so forth. So, it's made a dramatic impact on the fire service on Long Island, for sure.

Q: What do you think the future is of the Port Washington Fire Department?

JO: I'm almost afraid to say. I--the way things are going, if enrollment doesn't change and if

we don't ...

Q: Current enrollment is what?

JO: I'm sorry?

Q: Current enrollment is how many people?

JO: In my fire company--I can only speak for that; I don't know what the membership is in the others--but my fire company is down to about forty-seven members of a charter of one hundred.

Q: And when you joined?

JO: When I joined, there were over eighty--I think eighty-four members at the time. When I was in high school and thinking of joining, we were maxed out at a hundred members.

Q: Really?

JO: So that was in 1971, so you see what thirty-some-odd years can do. So, I hate to think, but I kind of get the feeling that somewhere down the road, we're going to have to have paid members to augment the volunteers. I think it seems inevitable. Because the

population of Port Washington is exploding still--even in 2005. Every time you turn around, there's a new development here and a new development here. And there are people coming in. The median age of the people is much higher than it was, I think, in the '70s. They're going to need help. They're going to need--you know, the ambulance has to be close by. The police obviously are being affected.

Q: Is that because they can't afford to live here?

JO: Well, the older folks can afford to live here much easier than the younger folks, you know. They should give some of that money to their kids, so the kids can stay here, right (laughs)? That's easy for me to say, but here my son is living in Suffolk (laughs). And--well, you know what it is, too. The young people that can afford to live here, I guess they're in such a different social environment that they don't really--I don't know whether they don't think of joining, or they just think that somebody else is there taking care of it. Because you ...

Q: As John Walters pointed out--I interviewed him--and he said, you know, it's basically been a blue collar force. And that people who hold blue collar jobs can't afford to live here.

JO: That's what it comes down to. I mean, if I had to move back into this town today, I'd be hard-pressed to pay the kind of the prices that are here. I'm glad that I'm here. I'm glad

that I have the equity in the property that I have. But doing what I do, I don't think I could live here today, like with today's prices. And that's the sinful part of it, you know. I wish--you know, people talk about low income housing and affordable housing. And everybody loves to talk about it. Everybody--it makes them feel terrific to talk about it. But you don't see anything happening. Not in this area anyhow. The new development that's going up here in the Dallas property, I don't know you--it's affordable, I guess, but it's not affordable to anybody under sixty-two years old. So, you're limiting a piece of property and some residences maybe some young people could afford, but you're limiting them to sixty-two years of age or older, which is a shame.

Q: So, as the town is growing and the Department shrinking, they may not have ...

JO: It's going to be a problem. I don't know if it'll be in my lifetime, but I think down the road somewhere, it's got to become a situation where if we don't provide, you know, some kind of affordable housing so that we maintain some of our younger people, I think we're going to be hiring people to do the firefighting.

Q: How have you been able to integrate this into running your business? I mean, that's, you know, you having a busy business.

JO: It's tough at times. It really is.

Q: But I guess you ...

JO: Well, see, as you get older, you tend to fight fewer and fewer fires. I think more of my time I'm go--I know more of my time now is dedicated to the administrative aspect of the fire company and the Fire Department than it was twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five years ago, I didn't want to know about paperwork, and now that's all I seem to be doing is paperwork.

Q: What kind of paperwork?

JO: Well, when I say paperwork, I mean just the day-to-day running of the firehouse. It's not necessarily paperwork per se, but, you know, making sure bills are paid. Making sure appointments are made. Maintaining the firehouse itself. Anything to do with the firehouse. Anything to do with the finances of the firehouse really has to be maintained, and again, as you get older, you kind of fall into that category where, now this is going to be your job. You're not running to fires, so, you know, we can use you up here in the office.

Q: Who cleans the firehouse? How does it stay so clean?

JO: We actually have a member who also is a custodian for us part-time. You know, he comes in a couple of days a week and takes care of things. And then, you really have to

stay on--the major things, we contract out. You know, we have people come in to do the painting when needed, and so on and so forth. So--but you have to stay on top of it. It's a big building.

Q: Right, it is.

JO: Things break. Things tend to fall apart. A lot of the things get done just through normal work nights every week. We get together and, you know, if you need a light bulb or a fixture or this ...

Q: Thursday night.

JO: Thursday night, yeah. Every Thursday we're up there. One Thursday a month is reserved for training specifically, and then three Thursdays a month are to maintain the trucks and to just keep the firehouse in good order.

Q: What's the most important lesson you've learned in firefighting.

JO: Not to underestimate anybody. Because I have learned that, whether you're a Captain or whether you're a rookie, somebody else talking may have the best idea of the day. And, in particular, at an emergency scene, in an emergency situation. And really, somebody mentioned that to me, I think, when I was a Lieutenant. And that is, don't discount

anything you hear at a fire. And I didn't really know what they meant, and then after the fire, we sat down, and [Coplay ?] who was an ex-Chief. And I said, "What the hell are you talking about?" He said, "You know, sometimes, you get the lowliest guy come up, and you may think he's just full of hot air and doesn't know what the hell he's talking about, and he may have seen something that you didn't. And he'll make a comment. Just listen to these guys," he says, "because you never know." And it's so true. So, one thing I've learned is really to keep all the avenues open, listen to everybody because everybody has something to give.

Q: So, if you had to do it all over again, would you do it the same way, or differently?

JO: If I had to do it all over again, hmmm. You know, I say that about life in general. There aren't too many things that I'm disappointed with. There are always changes that we'd like to make after the fact. But I don't regret anything I've done, no. No, I don't think I would change much. Knowing what I know today, sure, there are things I would like to change. But I'm certainly not disappointed with how things have gone or with what I've done. I think I've always done what's right for the fire company and what's right for the Department. I'm a firm believer in doing for the comp--whatever you can. Whatever--if I get involved with anything for the Fire Department, I always try to keep the Fire Department in mind. Not me personally--not what's in it for me. You see that mentality and that attitude with a lot of people, and usually those people don't stay members very long. But I really do believe if you're going to do something for any volunteer

organization, give it a hundred percent.

Q: What about--do you have other community activities?

JO: Me, personally? I'm a commissioner at the Water Pollution Control District, so that's an activity that keeps me somewhat busy. So, I'm involved there.

Q: And Peter Zwerlein. He's still there?

JO: Uh huh. yeah. Yep. As far--now, I've never been involved in sports. I mean, I support a lot of the--I support PYA. I support PAL, but I'm not directly involved. I just don't have enough hours in the day unfortunately.

Q: Did you make that plane for the seniors' Gambol?

JO: Well, I'm involved in three Gambols. Yeah, yeah. The plane. I loved the plane (laughs).

Q: I've got this turned up. Tell me how you did that. I saw it; I don't believe it.

JO: That was for my middle-age daughter's graduation. That was ...

Q: What's her name?

JO: Rachel. Rachel is my middle-age one. In 19--when was that now? 19--oh, I'm losing track of days. When did they graduate? '94, '96, and '98, I think it was. So, she graduated in '96. Could that be?

Q: And the theme was "Casablanca."

JO: "Casablanca." Which I had never watched, start to finish, until I was elected to be chairman of the construction committee. So it was a great Gambol (laughs). We could have used a little more help. Like everything else, you know, you always want a couple more people. So when I say I was chairman of the ...

Q: How did you get that plane up there?

JO: ... chairmen of the construction committee included me and a co-chairman. That was the construction committee. But the plane was a--originally thought up by the architect who was helping us doing the drawings, who also had a son graduating that year. And he kind of threw it out. He says, "You know, it'd be neat if we built a plane," and we all kind of said, "Yeah, right." And, lo and behold, we started thinking about that, and the idea came to pass that, you know what? we could really use that little roof over the front. We could probably do that. So, we started doing some sketches, and everybody says, "Naw, you know, that's ridiculous. That's crazy." And one thing led to another, and I'm a very

determined person when I make my mind up to do something. So, you know, we gave-- everybody had their special little jobs, and we decided to build this plane. Anyhow, we started building it, and we had no idea. And we started framing it out of wood. And we knew it had to be heavy enough to hold itself and light enough to put up on the alcove over there. So, two-by-fours and two-by-sixes and two-by-eights, and we made this, what looked sort of like a plane--a fuselage. And we thought about covering it in different material. We ended up using shrink-wrapping for a boat. Long story short is we made it out of four sections, because originally, the first section we built, we did it up at Salem School, and it was terrific except we couldn't get it out of the school (laughs). It was a bit too large to make the turn out of the building. So we revamped a little. We cut it down, and we made it out of four sections. And it was just a lot of fun. It was framed out of two-by-twos and two-by-fours and covered in this shrink-wrapping. And then we brought it up to Schreiber. Oh, before we brought it to Schreiber, though, I did bring it up to my shop, and we painted this white shrink-wrapping. I painted this whole thing with regular silver paint from the automotive paint. And we installed it one section at a time. And I've got to tell you, the closer we got to having it look like a plane, the more people wanted to participate, because they thought this thing was fantastic. And I tell you, we relive this any time we all get together. Whether it's the committee or anybody in that graduating class, we just love talking about that. That whole Gambol was terrific. But the plane was--yeah, that was something I really enjoyed.

Q: And did you do the other Gambols, too, for your other kids?

JO: I did. Yeah, I was involved more--not as much as--with my son's gambol--that was the first one. I did get involved, not to the point that I did for the next two. Because I got a little taste of it in '94, and I said, this is a lot of fun. A lot of time, but a lot of fun. And I got to tell you, when you're done with the Gambols--my youngest graduated in '98, and the theme was "New York Rocks." And that was a lot of fun, too. We had a lot of people that we had gone to school with, and a lot of friends participated, and we really had a lot of fun. What I was going to say, though, is when you're done with the Gambol--and the Gambol is just, it's four or five days and nights of working and trying to get all this stuff together. But it's finite. It ends the day of the Gambol. And I've got to tell you, when it ends, the next day you wake up and you say, well, what are we doing to do now (laughs). So, as much work as it is, it's just so enjoyable. We had such a good time, that I would do it again. I would do it in a heartbeat.

Q: Did you work with any of the firefighters on the Gambol?

JO: On the Gambol, we had--let's see, four ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... got crazy up there, swinging a hammer and using the screw drill. We kept him busy. We--what did we build that year? Let me think. We had a big banner across the front. Oh, we built the Brooklyn Bridge for "New York Rocks," for that Gambol. We built, you know, a mock-up of the Brooklyn Bridge. That was one of the things we did. And Donny Wilson who didn't have any children graduating, he helped us out with the

lighting and the wiring. He's a member also of Flower Hill. I'm sure there were more. You know, I can't--I can't remember who and what. But I remember know Jim Duncan, I know he had three kids that went through Schreiber, and I think they--I don't think they graduated the same year as my kids, but yeah, you get involved with the parents of the year before and the year after, somewhere during the course of the Gambol. So, we met a lot of nice people; we made a lot of friends. And it's nice because, you know, you know some of the kids. You know a lot of the kids. All your kids' friends you know, and you don't really know their parents necessarily. So a Gambol, you bump into people and you know the name as soon as they introduce themselves, and we've become friends with many of the parents since the Gambol. That was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun.

Q: So, now, you're the chairman of the Hundredth Anniversary.

JO: Chairman of the Hundredth Anniversary.

Q: So what's--what are you doing? What are you planning?

JO: Well, we have a whole year's worth of activities. Nothing overly dramatic, but, rather than do a typical hundredth anniversary where you have a block party and a parade. The committee got together early in the stages, and we decided, rather than doing that, we're going to do things for the members themselves.

Q: Like what?

JO: Nice affairs. Nothing really, really dramatic. But, you know, a picnic, a cocktail--an extra cocktail party, a little more elaborate of a dinner. Jack--you know, Fire Department guys love wearing jackets with their insignia. So, I mean, we got real nice jackets and sweatshirts and tee-shirts, and so on and so forth. So, without spending a ton of money, and without asking them to--as I said, with forty-some-odd members, you're limited as to what you can really do without calling in help, you know, or paying for help. And, to put together a parade and/or a block party really takes a lot more than what forty members can provide. When I say forty-six, forty-eight members, keep in mind that some of those members are old enough where they're not going to participate anyhow, and you're not going to ask them to come down and set up for a block party or a parade. So, we decided, rather than making all of our members work real hard, we're going to try to make it easy for them and just give them things to really enjoy the year. We started with a cocktail party we sponsored for the whole Department back in December, on the 11th. We had everybody down at the Polish Hall, and we had a blast. We had a real good time. We have a real nice dinner planned for--at the North Hempstead Country Club for May.

Q: Is that for just your company, or is that for all the companies?

JO: The dinner in May will be just for our company. And it's just for--dignitaries are invited, and they--you know, they give us proclamations and citations and all kinds of nice stuff.

So, North Hempstead Country Club does a real nice job. So it'll be a nice affair, I think. We are planning an awards ceremony perhaps--well, we are planning it for sure at the Villa Roma, Upstate New York, where the whole company will participate, or hopefully everybody will participate. And it'll be strictly for awards for our company. So, things like that during the course of the year. And we haven't ...

Q: Who's on the committee with you>

JO: It's myself, it's Tom Murray, Don Kurz.

Q: Same old successful ...

JO: Same old guys! You know, it's the same (laughs)--the same names keep popping up.

Q: (Laughs).

JO: Fred Falconer. Charlie Lang. Did I mention Charlie?

Q: No.

JO: He's another one of my favorite members. Charlie's got a story for every day of the week. Charlie's a terrific guy. Tom, Kurz ...

Q: Does he have any stories about the Fire Department?

JO: Does he?

Q: Yes.

JO: Oh, he's got stories about everything. Including--he's been around a long time. Charlie's--he's got--he's probably got forty years in--forty-some-odd years. His father before him; his son after him. So, at least three generations. Maybe his grandfather. I'm not even sure. But that's--he definitely comes from a long line of firefighters, Charlie does, yeah.

Q: Do a lot of the members of Flower Hill, are they legacies, that their fathers were in?

JO: We were talking about it not too long ago. We're doing a journal for the Hundredth Anniversary, and that's something we want to incorporate into the journal. Matter of fact, Frank Pavlak is doing an amazing job in collecting history for us, even though he doesn't belong to Flower Hill. We asked him ...

Q: Right. He's collecting stories.

JO: Oh, yeah. He's unbelievable.

Q: Right.

JO: So, he's been helping--he's been bringing us information. And one of the things we'd like to do is to highlight those members that have had sons or fathers. There aren't many. Honestly, there aren't many. The only two I--well, Charlie's--Charlie's son, Kevin, he moved out of town, so he's now a member of Roslyn--I'm not sure if it's rescue or which Roslyn company he's a member of. Fred Falconer's son is a member. Those may be the only two. Those are the only two I can really think of.

Q: And who's father's belonged?

JO: Belong or belonged?

Q: Belonged. You know, way back ...

JO: Way back. Well, I know Donny Kurz's father was a member. Fred Falconer's father was a member. Charlie Lang's father was a member. Jimmy Murray, his father was a member--oh, Jimmy Duncan, I'm sorry. Jimmy Duncan. I'm thinking of--I was thinking of Tom Murray at the same time. I don't think his father was a member of Flower Hill, although the Murray name keeps dotting here and there throughout the history, so I'm sure relatives, you know, uncles and so on and so forth. There's probably a lot more than

I know. Those come to mind right away, because I know those members now, and I know their fathers have been in there. I can't think of any others off the top of my head.

Q: So, is there anything else you want to talk about that we haven't--we haven't covered about the Fire Department, about your particular Fire Department?

JO: My particular company? All I can say, it's a great bunch of guys that are always willing to help.

Q: Did you want to be Chief? Is that something you aspire to?

JO: No, no. That's something that I really--as I mentioned before, even being Captain is really a full-time job, and I think being Chief--we've had some terrific Chiefs and we've had some not-so-terrific Chiefs. And the ones that are terrific seem to have a little more time on their hands that they can devote to the fire service. I have never had the luxury of spare time. My business just keeps me very busy. It really does. So, no, I never had any aspirations of being Chief. I enjoyed being an officer. I enjoyed being a line officer, right up to Captain. I just started my presidential spot here, so hopefully I'll enjoy that (laughs). But, no, being Chief, you really--in my mind, you have to be, not only dedicated, but you really have to have some free time to devote, because it does take a ton of time. It is a full-time job, without a doubt. Takes a lot of time. And I give all the credit in the world to the guys that they have had the position or will have the position. I

think they're doing a terrific job. We happen to have a very young group now that are Chiefs. Years ago, I remember when I first got in, or even before I got in, the Chiefs were not necessarily young firefighters. It was generally the guys that have been through the mill, that are very well versed. They know how to run a fire, but they weren't active like the Chiefs we have now. We're very lucky in that these guys are young enough that they still run up to every fire, night and day. Many of them are involved in the City Fire Department, City Police. So, their schedules are such that they can devote specific hours to the Fire Department here, and it's a wonderful thing. Whereas if I did it, I can't leave work to (laughs)--you know what I'm saying? I just couldn't do it. So it would be a disservice to the community for me to be Chief. But doing administrative work, you can do that at your leisure. Tonight, as an example, you know, I'll put my three or four hours in and get my things done for the week, and it works very well.

Q: Well, good.